

Limited Subject Matter

In Painting

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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

- I An artist is inventive and demands of himself something over and above mere representation. Since his primary aim is to design and to compose, the author suggests that the ambitious student set for himself the problem of working in a limited area as a test of his creative ability.
- II Material may be found in the artist's immediate surroundings which can be developed to great advantage.
- III The author's approach to the problem is a suggested possibility for art students and teachers.

Chapter II

Introduction and Theory

A section of a typical back alley in Columbus, Ohio was chosen for the technical portion of this thesis. With twenty paintings from this area and the written text, the author attempts to prove the following theory: An artist can adapt himself to the use of subject matter in a limited area. Through the artist's eyes an ash can is made exotic by moonlight; a tree trunk will suffice; a pile of tin cans is developed into an abstract representation. A seemingly small area will change with the sun and the moon to become an unending supply of material. There will be physical changes in the subject and mental changes on the part of the artist. Thus, the same location may be used for subject matter over a long period of time.

It is not the intention of this thesis to imply that limited material is a necessity for artists, but rather that such a limitation is a good test for his creative ability as well as a suggested approach for those who are unable to travel. Limited material does not have any magic quality which can by itself procure aesthetic results, nor is it implied that any particular subject matter holds the key to successful accomplishment. The artist himself must be inventive.

In Chapter III, research is presented to substantiate the theory. This research is drawn from statements of artists and critics covering the period from Impressionism through Contemporary art. In the writings of these men is evidence which leads to the supposition that at some time during their painting careers, they did set this problem for themselves.

Chapter IV presents four artists whose paintings illustrate the theory. They are: Cezanne, Marsden Hartley, Edward Hopper, and Charles Burchfield. Judging by their work there were times during their lives in which they limited themselves as to subject matter or have developed fine painting from insignificant material.

Chapter V offers reasons for choosing a typical back alley and the development of the technical problem. Discussed in this chapter are: possibilities for subject matter in such an alley, and the author's approach to the problem.

Chapter VI concerns implications of the theory for educational purposes. There is still a great tendency for the artist to seek exotic surroundings for inspiration. In this case, many in the art field are handicapped. Those placed at a disadvantage are teachers, students and artists who must turn to other work for a living. Lack of time, transportation and money are the restraining factors. In this chapter the author offers the theory promulgated as a possible solution for the artist or student who lacks opportunities for travel, and as a test for the inventiveness of a young painter during the long range plan for his own development.

Chapter III

Research to Substantiate the Theory

In this chapter are statements gathered from writings of successful artists and critics. There are three points to be considered. The first is the relative unimportance of subject matter; the second, definition of limited material and the possibilities for subject matter in a small area; and the third point, reasons for using a convenient locality.

The theory presumes that subject matter is relatively unimportant but essential. The first point concerns this presumption. Clive Bell, the art critic, believes, "The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant."¹ Aesthetic expression guided by good composition will yield a product in emotional content greater than had the artist tried to obtain an objective likeness. Alfred Maurer shares this view when he states, "The artist must be free.....Nature must not bind him or he would become more interested in the subject before him than in the things he feels need expression."² If the material aspect is to be ignored a process of artistic creation must replace it. Sheldon Cheney clarifys this process thusly:

....the form problem as the objective and subjective elements enter into it can be stated something like this: the artist sees objective forms in nature; due to his special sensibility, and in the grasp of his emotion they become, so to speak, forms subjective; they go through a filter of abstraction (his sense of absolute aesthetic form); and in the final expression retain more or less of the original object as emotionally felt, but it is the revelation of the abstract quality that counts most.³

1. Clive Bell, Art, p. 25.

2. Sidney Janis, Abstract and Surrealist Art, p. 41

3. Sheldon Cheney, A Primer of Modern Art, p. 45.

Cheney uses Cezanne for an example of this, "In so far as nature survives in the Cezanne canvas it is not as the casual eye sees it, but as natural objects affect the creative emotion of the artist."⁴ The general trend today is toward a more abstract representation. There is evidence that a likeness of the subject is not the goal although not undesirable. The words of Paul Klee are surely fortified by his artistic results,

Formerly it frequently happened to me that when questioned regarding a picture I simply did not know what it represented, I had not seen the subject, so to say. Now I have also included the content so that I know most of the time what is represented. But this only supports my experience that what matters in the ultimate end is the abstract meaning or harmonization.⁵

The second point concerns the definition of limited material and possibilities for subject matter in a small area. By limited material is meant the geographic limitations. If one can drive some distance to the spot then the artist is not limited. Driving provides a choice of material so that a location may be sought out for its particular picturesque quality or elegant color. This problem concerns the use of material taken from within the city limits, the street one lives on, or the back yard. There is an old story about a man who traveled all over the world, never satisfied with the things around him. Later a diamond mine was found in his back yard. In like manner many artists seek out the garden spots, never realizing perhaps that their imagination could develop a masterpiece out of a view from their own kitchen window.

There are many ways to develop compositions in a small area. One approach is to design composites. Pick subject matter from all

4. Ibid., p. 48

5. Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art, p. 443.

directions and juggle it around until it fits the paper. One object may do for many paintings when combined with various other material.

It is surprising to find Thomas Cole in 1825 saying,

....a departure from nature is not a necessary consequence in the painting of compositions: on the contrary, the most lovely and most perfect parts of nature may be brought together, and combined in a whole that shall surpass a single view.....He who would paint compositions and not be false, must sit down amidst his sketches, make selections, and combine them, and so have nature for every object that he paints.⁶

Thomas Cole made composites but used only the lovely characteristics of nature. It is possible, however, to use all aspects of nature thereby having a greater wealth of material from one small area.

Margaret Breuning, art critic, has summed up the trend of subject matter today:

As to subject matter, it is interesting to see how material has been discovered everywhere by the artist, appropriated by him to his own needs and given back to us in terms of his aesthetic emotion. It surely marks the modern water color and the old one, this choice of subject, or rather this power to take almost any subject and find in it a stimulus to creative expression....Further in this work there is evident to the most casual observer a remarkable ability to derive nourishment from contemporary life. These may go afield in search of pictorial material but they are apt to find it at hand in the routine of their daily lives out of which they pluck their subjects with all the force of their ruling passion..... It seems to matter little what material is chosen, if in the solvent of his imagination the artist may re-create it anew in intrinsic beauty of design tinged with the richness of intimate interpretation.⁷

Much can be acquired from one spot. The time of day will affect it. The subject takes on new meaning from each angle.

6. Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art, p. 280.

7. Margaret Breuning, "Contemporary Water Color Painters", International Studio, 83:23 Jan. '26.

Observation will reveal the endless possibilities. George Bellows felt that material could be used again and again:

A work of art is both independent of and dependent on a subject: independent in that all objective or subjective sensations, anything in fact which has the power to hold or receive human attention, may be the subject of a work of art; dependent in the sense of necessity, whether realized or not, a point of departure, a kernel, a unit established around which the creative imagination builds or weaves itself. The name given to a thing is not subject; it is only a convenient label. Any subject is inexhaustible.⁸

The imaginative artist can recognize qualities in the unpretentious which may be valuable to him. Such an artist is Fernand Leger who says, "Commonplace objects turned out in a series, are often more beautiful in proportion than many things called beautiful and given a badge of honor."⁹

We have discussed the irrelevancy of subject matter and possibilities in the development of a small area. Now, why should one use limited material? There are many reasons: it is a good test for aesthetic expression, lack of time, money and transportation prevent traveling, and if one is familiar with a nearby area he may use it conveniently whenever an urge for creative expression strikes.

Margaret Breuning in an article on an exhibit in New York says,

Very many of these young artists composing this group have had to do their painting on the side, as it were, for the serious business of earning a living requires their attention during the usual eight hour day. So if one finds gaiety and vivaciousness in the work, it results not from any carefree insouciance but rather from a deep absorption in the joy of creative expression.¹⁰

Not only does the professional artist lack time but the wife with a

8. Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art, p. 460

9. Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art, p. 426

10. Margaret Breuning, "Contemporary Water Color Painters," International Studio, 83:22 Jan '26.

family to care for may want to keep up with her vocation or hobby; the student is engaged much of the time in classes and traveling is usually out of the question.

At this particular time automobiles are at a low rate of production and will be for some time in the future. This lack of suitable transportation can limit the artist. It has been found cumbersome to carry a bottle of water, paints and a large stretcher on a bicycle.

Cezanne found it difficult to find material suitable for a particular occasion. In a letter to Emile Bernard, he states that he was anxious to execute his bathers on a large scale and from nature. He wrote,

....the lack of models has forced me to limit myself to these rough sketches. There were obstacles in my way; for example, how to find the proper setting for my picture, a setting which would not differ much from the one I visualized in my mind; how to gather together the necessary number of people; how to find men and women willing to undress and remain motionless in the poses I had determined. Moreover there was the difficulty of carrying about a large canvas, and the thousand difficulties of favorable or unfavorable weather.....So I was obliged to give up my project.....¹¹

The use of limited material is a good test for the artist's creative ability. He should be able to make a dull place exciting. If one is able to pass by a suitable location occasionally, this observation of it will suggest new ideas. The more thoroughly one knows the subject matter, the more likely he is to see the whole and its possibilities more clearly. Matisse says, "For me all is in the conception - I must have a clear vision of the whole composition

11. Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art, p. 363.

from the very beginning.¹²

Sometimes the artist may not have the desire to paint, but when he does, it is essential to start immediately. He is enabled to do so with a familiar locality near at hand. Vincent Van Gogh expresses this view in a letter to his brother, Theo,

Is it not emotion, the sincerity of one's feeling for nature that draws us, and if the emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without knowing one works.....then one must remember that it has not always been so, and that in the time to come there will again be heavy days, empty of inspiration.

So one must strike while the iron is hot, and put the forged bars on one side.¹³

From the words of these artists and critics then, it would seem to follow that any subject may serve and for a long time. We have seen how they feel toward their subject. Philip Evergood, while in Europe, spent some months in his room where he "painted one fish so long that it putrefied and turned phosphorescent."¹⁴ In this case perhaps it was time to take on a new subject. However, the artist's persistence and creative ability are shown by the fact that he was able to make one object the subject for many paintings.

12. Ibid., p. 412

13. Ibid., p. 381

14. Philip Evergood, "Sure I'm a Social Painter," Magazine of Art, 36:254 November, 1943.

Chapter IV

Four Artists Whose Paintings Illustrate the Theory

The four artists chosen to illustrate the theory on limited subject matter are: Cezanne, Marsden Hartley, Edward Hopper and Charles Burchfield. Their work shows that they did not seek out the picturesque. They seemed to be content with what they found around them even to the point of doing the subject over and over again. Their paintings reveal that they realized all the potentialities in one scene. The artists spent much time with the subject they chose. The possibilities of the locality were searched out. The subject did not grow old with these artists but with each painting something new emerged. They were interested in creating a painting which would express their feelings toward the object rather than the recording of it, therefore, the subject would do for many paintings. Marin said, "One responds differently toward different things; one even responds differently toward the same thing."¹

Cezanne is perhaps one of the best examples of this. At the end of the nineteen-eighties he devoted himself entirely to the interpreting of the country around Aix which is dominated by Mont Sainte Victoire. "No mountain has ever been explored by an artist so persistently, so incessantly as this".² This area also included the Chateau Noir, Bibemus Quarry and a railway viaduct. These land marks are in very many of Cezanne's paintings but Mont Ste.

1. Sidney Janis, Abstract and Surrealist Art in America, p. 38

2. Roger Fry, Cezanne, p. 74.

Victoire is seen most repeatedly. In correspondence to his brother, Emil Zola, and others he tells often of his walks to the Arc, many times to paint and other times for pleasure. The Arc is a little river which runs through this large valley near Aix. Here he liked to sit on the bank and paint the view which included Mont Ste. Victoire. Sometimes we see the viaduct through the trees or in others perhaps a house or tree in front of the mountain. He painted Ste. Victoire from many angles among which, some were from Belleview, from "Les Lauves" and from a path leading to the Chateau Noir. This part of the country became familiar to him and was explored extensively. It seemed never to lack material for his paintings. All was done with an interest in forms rather than actual representation.

In 1885 and 1886 he made long stays at Gardanne to the south of Aix where he painted a series of views of the town. The "Jas de Bouffan," with its buildings and chestnut trees became a fascinating subject for Cezanne. It seems that any spot he found had qualities of enduring interest for him, however, the section with Mont Ste. Victoire was perhaps the most popular.

Another painter who deprived himself of the beguilements of subject matter is Marsden Hartley. At first he wandered about in various countries but finally settled in his native state. In 1930 his eyes were "set firmly on Maine".³ From then until his death he painted almost nothing else. He is sometimes called "painter of mountains." Hartley himself said, "Segantine, Swiss Impressionistic

3. R. M. Coates, "The Art Galleries," New Yorker, 20:48 N4, 1944.

realist, through a reproduction in Jugend, showed me how to begin painting my own Maine mountains at Center Lovell and North Lovell Maine."⁴ His "Autumn" and "First Snow" are two of his many paintings of Mt. Katahdin. "Maine of all his haunts most consistently compelled his feeling and harmonized his mood. Probably for that reason he returned to it so often in his final years."⁵ After his death in 1934 his ashes were scattered, at his request, over the Androscoggin River which he used so much in his paintings. Marsden Hartley, in his regard for form and expression, has been able to paint his mountains over and over again without allowing his subject to become stale.

Another artist who has made the most commonplace objects in life subjects for his paintings, is Edward Hopper. Once while walking along the street a fellow painter said, "Look! What a wonderful composition those skyscrapers make, what light, what massing, look at them Hopper!" But Hopper wouldn't look. "Anything will make a good composition,"⁶ he said. He painted many Victorian houses bringing out their dignity more than their ugliness. He makes something arresting out of ordinary subjects such as lighthouses, lonely streets and houses or factories. Some of these paintings are, "Sunday Morning," "The Lonely House", "House by the Railroad", and two

4. Samuel M. Kootz, Modern American Painters, p. 40

5. Paul Rosenfeld, "Marsden Hartley," Nation, 157:326 S 18 1943.

6. Edward Hopper, Museum of Modern Art, 1933.

of his best water colors, "House of the Foghorn" and "Cold Storage Plant." His "Williamsburg Bridge" and "Freight Cars at Gloucester" show little interest in the search for traditional appealing subject matter. In fact, in the latter, one is surprised to find it was painted in Gloucester because most paintings done there have been picturesque. His subjects truly bear out his own statement that "anything will make a good composition." "Edward Hopper takes a house with a mansard roof, perched up on a steep hill, or a dull street with a clothes-line full on Monday's garments sadly flapping, and suddenly there is a splendour of color and radiance."⁷ Much of his work has been done in New York City. An artist could find picturesque material there and thereby use subject matter as a winning point for his painting. Hopper, however, has chosen insignificant spots and developed them so that the interest lies in the composition and personal expression.

Edward Hopper is the type of artist who could make something aesthetic out of a telephone pole. His painting "Captain Ed Staples" shows a man in a vest standing in the grass by a bay window of a typical wood frame house. It is the kind of thing snapped by a kodak on graduations or homecomings. Few could see in it material for a fine painting. Hopper has made an interesting composition and aesthetic painting of this subject. "He proves that the homely and the familiar may be more profoundly moving material for the thoughtful and sensitive painter than the exotic or florid."⁸

Charles Burchfield can be included among the painters who have

7. Margaret Breuning, "Contemporary Water Color Painters," International Studio, 83: 23 January 1926.

8. Ernest Brace, "Edward Hopper", Magazine of Art, 30:277, May, 1937

taken subject matter from their immediate surroundings. Burchfield has chosen simple and common subjects only to develop them into dynamic yet realistic statements.

The American painter's rediscovery of his native heath has been good for him, but his preoccupation with a new direction has made him slow to understand that some Americans, even in the turbulent decades since 1913, have been barely aware of the artistic opportunity close at home. Men like Edward Hopper in New England and Cameron Booth in Minnesota had been content to paint their own environmentWith the demobilization of forces at the end of the war (World War I) the tradition acquired another heir apparent.⁹

The "heir apparent" in the article referred to Charles Burchfield.

....he is not merely an observant artist but one whose mind by instinct deals with the typical.... His pictures are built upon sights which everyone living in this region has seen a thousand times until they seem as familiar as an old shoe....

Most people have the idea that the region where Burchfield lives, where he has always lived and which he paints, is ugly. Let us not argue the point but simply say that it has a character.¹⁰

Most of his subjects have been the ordinary type of thing taken from what he sees about him. His own house near Buffalo is small and inconspicuous. "From the door and out of the windows, one recognizes the subjects of many pictures."¹¹

"In the past five years, Burchfield's work has achieved a new scale and quality which I can only describe as authority."¹² Some of his later pictures are, "The Edge of Town," "Budding Poplar

9. "A Note on Burchfield, "Magazine of Art, 30:352, June, 1937.

10. E. P. Richardson, "Charles Burchfield", Magazine of Art, 37:209, October 1944.

11. Ibid., p. 210

12. Ibid., p. 212

Branches", "House Corner in Spring," "July," and "Winter." "These pictures have the same power that one sees in a Pieter de Hooch, to make a few walls and the roofs of some old buildings or the corner of a garden and the light on a wall, or a tree branch take on an extraordinary life."¹³ The author goes on to say that this authority to paint with such power comes partly "from the conquest of a difficulty."¹⁴ He was hindered by the lack of gasoline (during World War II) and also could not have the freedom of the docks in Buffalo as in former years. If this limitation of subject matter was good for Burchfield, it would seem to be a good test for any artist.

13. Ibid, p. 212

14. Ibid, p. 212

Chapter V

Development of the Technical Problem

A convenient alley was chosen to be used as subject matter for the twenty paintings included in this thesis. Because of its convenience it could be explored and observed at any time. It was possible to live in this area, search it out, and discover its many possibilities which at first were not apparent. It was chosen, however, for reasons other than its convenience. The alley itself is typical of the Midwest. It is a paved alley, half a block long, and consists of garages, a small grocery store, fences, and rubbish piles. Since this alley is entirely lacking in anything one could call picturesque it seemed a suitable spot to use in defense of the theory: An artist can adapt himself to the use of subject matter in a limited area. Another reason for choosing this location was that time, transportation and money prevented the author from traveling in search of pictorial material. Also being a wife necessitates being a good companion as well as artist. Consideration of others takes up much time which the artist would like to spend at the seashore or in the mountains. The logical conclusion, therefore, was to turn to the immediate vicinity for subject matter.

After becoming acquainted with the alley, its many possibilities evidenced themselves. From Spring to Summer the change was great. From morning to night the area took on a new character. The bright and sunny afternoon changed into long dramatic shadows and then after sunset a rosy glow pervaded the alley. Before and after a rain

the section created even more possibilities. After visiting it many times during the day, new compositions took shape. It is surprising to note all the things that can happen in such a small place. Horses and wagons drove through. Once a steam roller took refuge there for several days. Part of a large dominating tree fell after a storm, so a derrick disturbed the quiet and carried the rest of the tree away. A barn may fall over tomorrow.

In order to make the best use of the subject, it was painted in all its phases. If there was too much from one angle, the unimportant forms were eliminated. If there was not enough, imagination filled in the gaps. Composites were made; several parts of the alley fitted together in a single design. The objects in the alley were done many times over. Each time a new concept emerged depending upon the time of day, the weather, and the artists mood. Some of the paintings neared representation while others became abstract. With the subjective element on the part of the artist, the limited subject matter was found inexhaustible.

Chapter VI
Implications of the Theory
for Educational Purposes

The art student is usually restricted to a specific location. If the vicinity is lacking in anything outstanding for use as subject matter, he feels limited. He resigns himself to the fact that he is not to blame if his output is inferior because he has nothing to inspire him. On the other hand, if the student can be convinced of the many good qualities in his surroundings, he will escape the attitude of resignation and develop a sincere desire to remain where he is.

The restrictions as to travel are many. The student and teacher lack time to go any great distance for subject matter. Art periods are often short and spare time jobs or other academic subjects must be considered. Usually there is the problem of transportation. Few students have their own automobiles and the inadequacy of a bicycle has already been mentioned in a previous chapter. What is left? The bus, the trolley and the train are the remaining solutions. Besides the difficulties of handling artist's supplies on these conveyances, the element of time enters in again. A student with only two hours in which to leave the school, arrive at the destination, paint, and return will find much of his time has been spent coming and going. In elementary and secondary education it is a difficult problem to guide a large class to picturesque subject matter unless a school bus or several automobiles are furnished.

The college student would perhaps like to spend a summer in Mexico.

He has heard of many artists who spend their summers there. He feels he will never become a fine artist unless he has the same opportunities but financially he is unable to leave his own city. He has a job upon which he is dependent. The outlook is discouraging and because of his dreams of Mexico, he is blind to the many possibilities which can be found at his fingertips.

The teacher can be helpful in directing the student's interest. If the student can realize the importance of good design, this will help lessen his natural inclination toward the exotic or picturesque. When this is done he will not be too concerned about what he has to paint. The possibilities for approaching the subject can be suggested by the teacher so that the student will become enthusiastic and inventive.

Therefore, the theory advanced in preceding pages is offered to the art teacher, elementary and secondary students, college students, and students who during vacations must work for their living expenses. Professional artists have used limited material. One can observe their results if there is any doubt. When the art student can place composition and the creative element above subject matter, the results are likely to be far more artistic than if subject matter were allowed the upper hand. When there is limited material, it's possible that composition and the creative element may gradually become foremost in importance because the subject in its lack of appeal will not command all of the student's attention. The teacher, then, must cultivate in the children the desire to create. Otherwise the subject matter will have no value and the resulting painting will have no aesthetic quality. The endless possibilities for subject matter in a single locality have

already been discussed. After considering it in all its aspects, whichever area is chosen will have a wealth of material. Aside from this, the art student's interest in design is likely to grow in importance, while academic representation becomes irrelevant. Time, transportation and the financial factors become subordinate. With a creative attitude, he may discipline himself by attempting this problem of using a limited area and so adapt himself to a greater number of situations.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

In an endeavor to prove that any subject matter will serve, twenty paintings are presented, all painted from one small alley. From evidence of authorities on art it would seem to follow that aesthetic results may be attained without a wealth of material. This method can be valuable not only to artists, but to students and teachers as well. The thesis then offers a test for the artist's or art student's creative ability and a possible approach for those who lack opportunities for travel.

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